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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
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SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH GNP PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATE PARK GEUN-HYE

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador met with GNP Presidential candidate Park Geun-hye on February 5. Park reiterated her commitment to follow her principles and run a clean campaign against her GNP rival, Lee Myung-bak, and dispelled any notions that she might leave the party to run as an independent if Lee wins the GNP nomination. They discussed topics that were likely to dominate the ROK presidential race including a constitutional amendment to allow two Presidential terms, engagement with North Korea and political party restructuring. The committee organized to formulate the GNP primary has started its work and some results were expected later this month. Park said that she remains supportive of the KORUS FTA and believes that there was sufficient support within the GNP and other parties to get the agreement through the National Assembly. END SUMMARY

POLITICAL ISSUES OVER POLICY

¶2. (C) Park explained that she plans to continue her practice of holding press briefings to outline her policy stance on a wide range of issues. This week alone, she would hold briefings on the economy, military and the environment. She said that she always talks about policy with the people and does not understand why her main GNP contender, Lee Myung-bak, does not follow suit. Park said that Lee focused on North-South relations when talking policy in Korea, and then U.S.-Korea relations when he went to Washington. He has not clarified which was his main priority. He has also chosen not to clarify his policies on education, the National Security Law or the economy. Park was skeptical that the Korean media would take responsibility to bring the individual candidate's policies to light.

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

¶3. (C) Park said that President Roh's idea to amend the constitution to allow for two four-year terms in office was "not a bad idea," it was just presented at a bad time. If Roh were serious about this amendment, he would not have waited until his approval ratings were near single digits, Park said. Although some candidates may choose to take up this issue as part of their platform, ultimately the public would voice its opinion during the election in December and

thereby send a message to the next administration whether the change should go forward or not. Roh was only trying to "shake things up" since he knows that his party would not win the next election.

STATUS OF THE GNP

14. (C) Park dismissed the notion that she might choose to leave the GNP and run as an independent if Lee wins the primary in June. She said that the public wants a GNP president and therefore she would remain loyal to the party. She also expressed her belief that she can run a "civil" campaign that would not attack Lee personally. Drawing on her experience as the former GNP Leader, she noted that she chose not to respond to personal attacks from Lee and members of the Uri party. Although she may have looked weak by not responding, she said she was successful given that the Uri Party cycled through nine different leaders in the time that she was at the helm of the GNP. Park opined that fellow GNP presidential hopeful Sohn Hak-kyu (being courted to join a new center-left party) would also remain loyal to the GNP party, as he has said publicly a number of times.

15. (C) Park said that she expected some initial results from the GNP Primary Committee later this month. Given the scheduled date for the primary in June, candidates would need to focus their energies starting in April, leaving little time for the committee to deliberate over the formula for the primary. Park said that she expected to have relatively strong support in the southwest region of Korea until a strong Uri candidate emerged. For now, GNP support in the region was in the double digits. Park asserted that the GNP would remain near the center of the political spectrum, despite media and opposition claims that Park was "extreme." When Park has challenged those claims and spelled out her positions, the opposition did not offer a clear definition of extreme.

ENGAGEMENT WITH NORTH KOREA

16. (C) Park said that since she has been a member of the GNP, she has always supported engagement with North Korea, albeit within strict guidelines. If the government had listened to her in the past, they would not be caught in the present situation, still coming to grips with the North's missile and nuclear tests. Park confirmed that she still supports certain provisions of the National Security Law (NSL), including the ban on pro-North Korean groups, while Lee wanted to scrap the entire law.

17. (C) If an inter-Korean summit were held this year, Park suggested the only issue that should be discussed would be the denuclearization of the peninsula. Any attempt to address other issues such as a federal system between North and South Korea would lead to chaos in the South. Also, the South would run the risk of making an agreement with the North that was counterproductive to the tougher stance currently being taken in the Six-Party Talks. An example of this type of situation was when former President Kim Dae-jung issued a declaration following his June 15, 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il in which he declared that there was no longer the probability of war on the Korean peninsula. Despite Kim's declaration, the North continued to develop missile and nuclear capabilities.

18. (C) Park said her opportunity to have met with Kim Jong-il would hopefully be a positive factor in her bid for election, but noted that the DPRK regime continues to speak negatively about the GNP in its attempt to influence the ROK elections. Because of this improper influence, Park said she advocated the suspension of activities at the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism area, but the current administration had chosen to back down in these instances rather than push the North for an apology.

KORUS FTA

¶9. (C) Park assured the Ambassador that she would not oppose the KORUS FTA simply because President Roh was in favor of the agreement. Park said she believed that Roh should be praised for good initiatives and criticized for weak ones. Roh should recognize that there were some sensitive areas in the agreement and work to ameliorate those concerns, especially in the agricultural sector. If the KORUS FTA can be ratified by both governments, it would give a strong boost to U.S.-Korea relations.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) These are difficult times for Park Geun-hye, trailing her GNP rival by some 20 percentage points in most polls. Eldest daughter of former authoritarian president Park Chung-hee, Park Geun-hye is often called the Princess by her detractors, not a compliment as she is much too prim and proper for the rough and tumble of Korean politics (although she has adopted a more trendy hair style and mode of dress). Park's greatest frustration is that she has overseen a period of enormous popularity for the GNP, but only to see it gradually usurped by Lee Myung-bak. The stampede toward Lee has been particularly pronounced since the North Korean nuclear test in October, with the former Seoul mayor capitalizing on the sentiment that it would take a "real man" to stand up to Kim Jong-il.

¶11. (C) Still, with some 20 percent of the electorate solidly behind her, Park clings to the hope that a comeback is possible, and that Lee's high poll ratings cannot last. There are some indications that, contrary to what she told the Ambassador, her gloves are off, because her staff have

been quite busy spreading rumors about Lee. One example is the allegation that Lee's mother was a Japanese; a rumor with no evidence. Another similar charge is that Lee accumulated enormous wealth, perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars, while employed by Hyundai Group. So far, however, these rumors have made no dent in Lee's support and Park remains a distant second to the former Seoul mayor in the presidential sweepstakes. But given her forthright stance on the issues and her strong base within the Party organization, we would definitely not count her out.

VERSHBOW